

my lead to blow

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by [amidsizedfrog](#)

Summary

“Now,” Jackson instructs Dean, mouth against this neck, “I’m going to show you how to do a suicide cradle. Your shoulders are gonna hit that mat at the end of the roll, right,” Jackson thumps the mat to demonstrate, “and you can’t panic. You gotta hold me tight. You got a loose grip, you panic even a little, then it’s gone, right? Cause you’re putting yourself in a position to get pinned. You gotta hold tight and roll him over.”

Or, when Dean Winchester is sixteen, he gets arrested for stealing, sent to a boys home and joins a high school wrestling team. Surprisingly, it's the wrestling team that makes the biggest impression.

Notes

Hiii everyone! First off -- shout out to @lesbiantoziers and @virginalbehemoth for beta reading it (& everyone else for reading it & hyping me up!!)

This was written for a 'take your fandom to work' fic prompt and I, just like Dean Winchester himself, actually wrestled in high school! I wanted to use wrestling as a backdrop to explore a pre-series' Dean's relationship with his sexuality, athleticism and normalcy. Wrestling really meant a lot to me in high school and hopefully I was able to do the sport and Dean himself some justice in this fic. Enjoy!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Round One: High school style wrestling, or folkstyle wrestling, consists of three rounds, each lasting two minutes. The first round starts with both wrestlers in “neutral” position. In neutral position, both wrestlers are on their feet, mirroring each other on opposite sides of the mat.

Dean meets Jackson on the first day of school. The principal passes him off to his office aid to give him a tour around the school before homeroom. The office aide is a nice enough girl, but she’s nervous and Dean’s nervous so he doesn’t speak and she spends the entire twenty minutes babbling out the names and histories of everyone they walk past.

Apparently, Jackson does wrestling and moved here two years ago and is really really nice. A little weird, but nice.

Dean finds out later that Jackson sits behind him in math. Actual attendance and all that jazz is a condition of his arrangement with the police, else Dean wouldn’t be there. Sonny tried to tell Dean it wouldn’t be so bad and he knew Dean could do it, which was so far from true it circled back around to being kinda sweet. At least how Dean saw it. And anyway, Dean could probably do it. Dean has to do it, so he’ll get it done. Dean’s good like that.

Jackson sits behind him and tries to cheat off him.

It’s a little funny. Dean catches him out, ‘cause he recognizes the tricks. Jackson’s looking over at Dean, peeping back and forth between Dean’s desk and his. Cheating, obviously.

Dean doesn’t do anything, though. Jackson’ll find out soon enough that Dean isn’t the brightest bulb. He smiles at him. Jackson smiles back. It’s bright and wide and Dean sits there for a second, stupid, just looking at it.

He shakes it off. Just means that Jackson’s cool, he tells himself.

He doesn’t mean to look over at Jackson again, and for most of the lesson he doesn’t. They’re nearing the end, Dean’s hand starting to cramp, when his eyes flicker over to Jackson. Jackson— Jackson looks like he’s got a lot of notes down. He doesn’t look like someone who

needs to cheat. His eyebrows are scrunched up and his writing is real small. He's using color coded pens for notes.

Dean flushes.

He looks back at his own notes, which are neat but aren't nearly as nice looking, for the rest of the class.

When the bell rings, he shoves everything off his desk into the bag Sonny forced him to take and makes for the door.

"Hey, man." Feeling something catch on his wrist, Dean's deftly shifting out of the way before his mind can register the words. Unfortunate reminder that Dean's still got bruises up and down his forearm. "Sorry," the voice says.

Dean knows from experience that it's a lot more intimidating to give someone a whole lotta of nothing when they've fucked up, but it's a hell of a lot more fun to give out a one-liner. Speaking reminds Dean he's in control, too. Dean doesn't get that far, though, because when he turns around, it's Jackson.

"You're pretty good at that," Jackson says. "Ever done wrestling?"

Dean scoffs.

"No," Jackson says. "For real. I'm the junior team captain. Means I help with the recruiting."

"I don't have time for that junk," Dean tells him automatically. His insides twist. He probably does have time for junk now.

Jackson makes a face. It makes Dean smile a bit. "Yeah, yeah. New school. I get it."

Dean nods. "It's a lot of catching up." It's true, but Dean isn't really sure why he says it.

"If that's how you feel," Jackson says. "I guess there's no arguing with you." He's smiling again.

"There isn't," Dean tells him, even if he isn't sure.

Jackson hesitates for a second, then throws out: "Because you were pretty squirmy, getting out of my grip."

Dean keeps his arms very still at his side. He knows what's supposed

to happen now. Guys don't mean that kind of thing like a compliment.

But he's gonna have to be here a while. Plus, Jackson'd smiled at him and been cool about the whole notes thing, so Dean figures he owes it to him to just stand still and take it. 'Sides, he can take a hit if it means Sonny won't get bothered over Dean's dumb ass. Sonny's alright. Dean doesn't want to cause him any trouble. Jackson's a wrestler, anyway, not a boxer, so he probably can't even punch that hard to begin with.

"So?" he tells Jackson, roughly.

"So you'd be good at wrestling," Jackson says, like Dean's stupid.

"Oh," Dean says, stupidly.

"And," Jackson prompts, bending down conspiratorially, "you should join the team." He stayed there, a little over in Dean's space, waiting.

"Can't," Dean repeats. "I'm," he glances around, "new. Lots of, uh, work to catch up on. If you catch my drift." He grins, pointing his head back at the group of girls walking down the hallway, the way he thought Han Solo might do if he was ever forced to take stupid high school math classes.

Jackson drops it. He gives Dean a grin back, which makes Dean's palms a little sweaty. He surreptitiously tries to wipe them on the t-shirt Sonny had found for him last night. "Can't blame a guy for trying," Jackson says, easy. "Let me know if you change your mind."

He clamps a hand down against Dean's shoulder, once, and then he's off and out of the classroom, leaving Dean there holding the edges of a shirt that's at least two sizes big on him.

He thinks Jackson will leave him alone after that, and he's kind of right about that. Jackson still waves at him, sometimes. And once, he even sat next to Dean in math. Right, so that wasn't a big deal. Jackson probably didn't think about it. Or Dean. And Dean didn't

think about it either.

It was cool, though. He lets Dean use his colored pens now. The red one. Dean chose it, 'cause red is a badass color, even if it makes it look like there are all kinds of mistakes on his paper.

Other than that, though, Jackson left Dean alone. Which didn't stop Dean from thinking about him.

He asked Sonny about wrestling once, and Sonny gave him one of those appraising looks and told him they'd have to start stocking up on eggs if he wanted to take up wrestling. Protein, he'd explained to Dean's blank face. Dean figured that was as much of an endorsement as anything, and he thought, *maybe* .

When he saw Jackson getting lunch with a handful of boys, laughing so loudly it hit Dean, sitting off on the other end of the cafeteria, he thought, *possibly* .

And then Jackson smiled at him and offered Dean half his Oreo's after math and Dean thought, *okay*. And then, just as quickly, *absolutely not*.

Dad, he argued with himself that night, might even like it if Dean kept up his fighting skills. Dean had to be ready for when Dad came back for him. Had to make it up to Dad, for fucking up with the food, show him Dean could still be trusted. Because Dad would come back. Eventually. Once Dean learned his lesson.

So Dean considered it. He really did.

If Dean left English class right at the bell, he could get to his math class right after Jackson, who had lunch period when Dean was in English. Jackson usually waved him on over, and if Dean had walked quick, he could grab a seat near him.

Jackson wasn't here today though. Dean stopped in the doorway and glanced around. His face falls.

“Hey, Dean.” The voice comes from behind Dean, but this time it doesn’t scare him.

“Jackson,” Dean turns to wave, hoping Jackson hadn’t seen him looking around like an idiot.

Jackson’s still smiling at Dean, though, so he probably didn’t notice. “I was helping Coach set up the gym for our dual meet.”

“Dual meet?”

“Tournament we’re hosting just against another school. Season hasn’t started officially yet, so it’s just practice. Tryouts are this Thursday. If you’ve changed your mind.”

That was as good an opening as any. “Oh—”

“Boys.” The teacher interrupts them. “Would you mind taking your seats?”

Dean bites the inside of his cheek and tightens his hand on his bag strap. “Of course, Mr Hens,” Jackson agrees. “Come on,” he tells Dean, who follows obediently. Jackson heads straight to the back and starts setting up his stuff. He hands Dean his red pen without a word.

“Thanks,” Dean tells him.

“I have tons,” Jackson says. “You can take more, if you’d like. Or we can share.” He opens the bag between them.

Dean shakes his head. It’s nice to see the bag open in front of them. “Nah,” he says. “Gotta keep it black and red. More dangerous like that.” He waggles his eyebrows. “Sexier.”

Jackson laughs. “I dunno,” he says. “Green’s pretty nice too.”

Dean scoffs. Jackson’s an idiot. “Your funeral.”

Mr Hens starts speaking then, and Jackson turns to the front. Dean stays turned for a second, then snaps to the front. He thinks they covered this at a school Dean was at two months ago. He figures he should write it down anyway.

He clicks open Jackson’s pen.

“God,” Jackson says, at one point, looking down at Dean’s notes, “how do you read that?”

“Good eyesight,” replies Dean. He’s smirking, ‘cause he’s seen Jackson using his glasses in the library when there weren’t a lot of other people around, and sure enough, he’s rewarded by a faux scowl from Jackson.

It feels good. It’s just temporary, but it’s nice to have -- something that quacks a bit like a friend. It makes school and Sonny’s seem not so enormous.

Then Mr Hens pulls out the chalkboard pencil and Dean stifles a groan. He’s going to have to pay real close attention for the rest of the lecture. He hates doing the graphs. It feels like he missed some fundamental explainer step using them, and, hell, he probably did.

He puts the pen to the paper and after twenty minutes his head is starting to ache. He’s grateful when the lesson ends. It’s Dean’s last class of the day, so it’s extra nice.

Dean starts putting his stuff away, slowly. It doesn’t take long. Soon, he’s all packed up and holding out the red pen for Jackson to take.

“Thanks.” Jackson zips up his pencil case.

“So,” Dean starts at the same time as Jackson. “You go,” he tells him.

“I got twenty-five minutes before wrestling practice starts,” Jackson says, giving Dean a grin, “if you’re not too busy.”

“Or too sick of your company.”

“Nah,” Jackson tells him, “I’m a delight.”

Dean’s lips twitch. “Alright,” he relents, “I’ll try out for wrestling.”

Jackson gives him a real big smile then, and it makes Dean feel hot all over.

The next day, Jackson approaches Dean in the cafeteria. That’s surprising enough on its own. Not just because Jackson seems like the

type of guy who has a lot of friends -- Dean can't imagine anyone not wanting to hang out with him -- but also because Jackson and Dean don't really talk outside of math class. Dean can't help but look around involuntarily just in case Jackson is coming up to someone else in the hall, but no. It's Dean.

"Looks like you're having a fun morning."

"Huh?"

Jackson points. Dean's fly is unzipped. Dean zips it back up, ears burning, hoping his face isn't turning red. "Thanks man," he tells Jackson.

"Anytime," Jackson says. "You didn't answer my question, though."

Dean frowns.

"Rough morning?" Jackson clarifies. He smirks. "Nervous about something, maybe?"

Oh. Right. "That wasn't really a question," Dean says. "Really more of a statement, when you get down to it."

Jackson makes a face at him. "You really think you're funny, don't you?"

"What," Dean spreads his hands wide, "you don't?"

Jackson's shaking his head but he's smiling and Dean smiling back at him and they're standing there smiling back and forth like loons until Jackson's friends call him over and Jackson jolts to life.

"Tryouts tonight?" he points at Dean.

Dean waves him off. "We'll see."

"I'll take it."

"You're going to be late if you don't," Dean tells him, even though Jackson is almost at the end of the hall and he's got to yell a little bit at this point.

"One of these days," Jackson yells back, "you're gonna let me have the last word."

"Not today, though," Dean agrees and almost laughs when Jackson

just flips him off instead of responding.

Then Jackson joins his friends and Dean goes to shove a sandwich down his throat at the farthest corner of the campus cafeteria he can find.

Wrestling tryouts go from three to four thirty. Dean shows up at four.

“Dean!” Jackson says. He sounds happy, Dean thinks. A little surprised, maybe. Annoyed? Dean can’t tell.

“Uh, hi,” Dean stumbles over his words. This should be the easy part. Dean is good at this.

“I was starting to think you wouldn’t show.”

“Yeah, well,” Dean says because he’s that kind of a dumbass. It just makes Jackson laugh even as it makes the back of Dean’s neck burn. “Here I am.”

“We’re happy to have you,” he tells Dean which makes Dean feel like he’s out of breath already. Which is dumb. It hasn’t been that long since he was hunting. He shouldn’t be this out of shape yet. “Come on. I’ll take you to the mat.”

He doesn’t grab Dean’s shoulder or anything like he usually does. Instead, he gestures at Dean and Dean, keeping a careful distance between them, follows. There are eight boys and two girls gathered in some kind of circle. They’re inside a big white circle on a puffy red mat. This is, Dean assumes, The Mat.

“Congrats,” Jackson tells him. “You’re on the team.”

Dean looks around. “What?”

“Wrestling isn’t a very popular sport. You’re the only person who’s showed up.”

“Shown,” one of the boys on the team says. “It’s shown up.”

“Shut up,” another boy says. “You’re embarrassing Jackson in front of the new recruit.”

Jackson scoffed. “Only embarrassing thing that happened on this team was Kamal getting pinned in this first round on Monday.”

There’s some more grumbling from the team, and the wrestler Dean assumes is Kamal rolls his eyes.

“So, that’s it?” Dean checks.

“That’s it.”

Dean isn’t sure how he feels about that, but he shrugs and heads for the door anyway. It’ll be weird to go home now, too, especially after he told Sonny he’d be back later, but—

“Woah,” a thin, wiry man with grey hair and calves larger than Dean’s head stops him. “Where are you going kid? Thought you were a new recruit.”

“Uh.” Dean looks to Jackson, who is absolutely no help. “I ... don’t know?”

“Right,” the man says. “Well, if you don’t know where you’re going you might as well sit down.” He waits, meaningfully, until Dean cotton’s on and plops down on the mat. “That’s better,” the man tells him. “I’m Coach Chin, and that’s Coach Smith.” He gestures at the shorter, broader, whiter man right next to him.

“Dean,” Dean says. “Uh, sir.”

“Jackson, where’d you find this guy?” Coach Chin asks, then, not waiting for an answer, tells Dean, “Coach will do.” Dean nods vigorously. “Now, Dean, I want you to get back in there and get your gear from Jackson. He’s going to set you up with some shorts and a mouth guard. New,” he reassures Dean. “Don’t worry.” Dean hadn’t even thought about that. “Practice starts at 4:30 and we won’t be going slow just ‘cause you’re new.”

“Right. Coach,” Dean adds, which just makes both the coaches laugh. He jumps up after a moment’s hesitation and walks over to Jackson. This time, Jackson brings Dean into a dimly lit closet backroom and starts rifling through the boxes on the bottom row.

“You are such an asshole,” Dean hisses at Jackson’s as soon as they’re

alone. “You made it sound like tryouts were this whole big thing! You said you practiced for hours beforehand. I almost asked Sonny if we could watch the wrestling channel—”

“Better to be over prepared than underprepared.”

“Asshole,” Dean repeats. “And what the hell is this?” he asks, when Jackson thrusts some shorts at him.

“Dean,” Jackson says, “you’re on the team. Practice starts at 4:30. I told you—”

“Oh, fuck,” Dean says, “you mean I gotta be here another two hours?”

“We’re starting kinda late because it’s a tryout day, so we’ll probably only go to six.”

That doesn’t make Dean feel better. “That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“Come on,” Jackson tells him, “let’s get you suited up.”

He’s on his second lap around the track when Jackson, on this third, catches up to Dean.

“Hey,” he says. “Figured you might want someone to explain the rules.”

“How are you even talking right now,” Dean spits out against the stitch in his side.

Jackson starts to laugh and then cuts himself off with an awful wheeze almost immediately. He stumbles a bit but doesn’t lose the pace.

Dean’s—jealous. He thinks.

“Can’t laugh,” Jackson says, “I’m not that good,” and now Dean wants to laugh but he’s sure he’d do even worse than Jackson if he started laughing. He’d probably fall right on his face or hack up a lung or something.

“There’s three rounds,” he says. “You win by points or a pin.”

“Pin?” Dean’s chest burns.

“Back of shoulders on the mat for three seconds.”

Sure. *Why not* .

“Points?”

Jackson waits a few strides before continuing. Dean doesn’t blame him. “Taking someone down, getting close to a pin or,” Jackson pants, “escaping someone’s hold. Points.”

Dean keeps running. It’s eight laps and then on to strength conditioning. Wrestling is going to be—this is going to be harder than he thought.

They finish conditioning and the coaches have them drilling shoots and sprawls. It’s relentless. Even dad didn’t make him and Sam repeat stuff as much as the coaches do. It’s gotta be muscle memory. Completely natural. Better to do three moves well than seven moves okay.

Dean’s not sure that’s true. Isn’t it better to have more than one trick up your sleeve? Or at least know what other moves the other guys might try on you? Might give you a few ideas, at least.

But he’s not questioning it.

Dean’s exhausted by the time they move on to actual wrestling, instead of just drilling different moves.

Coach pairs them off and blows a whistle and then they’re going. Kamal, who Dean is paired with, takes him down immediately. He lands soft, all things considered, and Kamal offers him a hand up.

“It’s a real steep learning curve,” he tells Dean, “but you’ll get it. It’s just going to suck a lot right now.”

Well. At least that’s familiar.

Kamal comes at him again. Somehow, he gets Dean down even faster which is just frigging unfair. It’s not a learning curve, it’s a goddamn straight line. And it’s going backwards.

Dean’s body is already aching in places he didn’t know it could ache.

Unwillingly, he's a little impressed. He looks up at the wall. ONCE YOU'VE WRESTLED EVERYTHING ELSE IN LIFE IS EASY, the wall tells him. Well, Dean's not convinced, but he's starting to understand the shape of the argument. He gets up and wipes his palms.

"You want some advice?"

Dean shrugs and tries to look unbothered. The effect is ruined by the sweat dripping off his head and the faint tremors in his legs.

"You don't know too many moves," Kamal says. "Stick to what you do know. Stop trying to do fancy stuff."

"I'm not," Dean objected.

"You're trying to fight me. This is wrestling, man. If someone knows more moves than you, and I do know more moves than you, you can't beat them by trying to outsmart 'em."

Coach blows the whistle. Dean and Kamal get back into neutral, circling each other. To his surprise, Kamal keeps talking. "You only know three moves, man. And I know that, and you know that, so you gotta perform those three moves so good that it doesn't matter that we both know you know them. Stick to what you know. And force me to stick to what you know."

Maybe it's the number of times his head has been slammed into a padded mat today. Maybe Kamal is starting to make sense. He thinks. Kamal likes going for a throw. Dean usually tries to fight it off, or turn into the throw like he's seen Gunner Lawless do on TV.

This time, when Kamal goes for the throw, Dean backs out and knocks his hand away. The only thing Dean's practiced today is stopping a shoot, so he's gotta force Kamal to go for his legs.

Make him try a move Dean knows how to defend.

Kamal shoots; Dean sprawls, and then they're off.

Kamal still gets him down, but Dean holds him in a sprawl for most of the first round.

They go again.

They go until six thirty and Dean doesn't land a single pin. It doesn't matter, though. He thinks he kinda likes it.

Jackson waits for Dean after practice. It surprises Dean, because Dean's been doing everything he could not to look at Jackson during practice and to stay in his own space, so when Jackson comes over and bumps his shoulder, Dean drops his bag on his foot.

Jackson picks it up for him. "So," he says. "You ain't about to quit on us, right?"

"Hell no," Dean blurts out, before he can think about it, his stomach jittering up and down.

"Good." Jackson's voice is a lot deeper than Dean's, and it sounds all kinds of warm when he's happy.

Dean preens a bit until he realizes he's doing it. "Thanks for inviting me," he tells Jackson, making his voice extra gruff.

"Team's happy to have you."

Dean shakes his head. "I wouldn't be too sure about that. I really—" he waves his hands around inarticulately, which makes them ache. "—in there."

"Eh," Jackson tells him. "Better than me in my first practice."

"No way."

"You caught on quick," Jackson says. "I kept trying to surprise them, throw 'em off their game. Didn't play it smart, like you."

Oh. Dean swallows. "Kamal gave me some advice."

"Yeah," Jackson says, "we give that advice to every newbie. We just don't see people following it too often."

"It made sense," Dean shrugs, which makes Jackson shake his head and nudge him again with his shoulder. It's nice. It's nice to have a friend. Dean hopes, then, that he won't have to wrestle Jackson.

Round Two: the second round of a traditional folkstyle wrestling match begins with both wrestlers in “referee’s position”. Referee’s position has a top and a bottom position. The bottom, or wrestler in the “defensive starting position” kneels with their hands spaced shoulder width apart in front of them on the mat. The top or wrestler in the “offensive starting position” kneels behind the bottom wrestler, with one arm wrapped around the bottom wrestler’s waist and the other on their elbow.

In Round Two, one of the wrestlers will get the opportunity to choose if they want to take top or bottom position.

Dean starts practicing at Sonny’s. He doesn’t mean to, but Sonny keeps asking about wrestling, trying to offer him these bogus tips that Dean knows *Sonny* knows are bogus, so Dean’s just trying to show the old man what’s up. A couple of the other kids like it, so Dean starts holding a few impromptu lessons on weekends, in between chores. It’s not just wrestling, either. Dean’s got lots of tips on fighting and on ducking, which kids that wind up at a place like Sonny’s try to pretend they already know. They don’t, though. Dean can see it on their baby fat faces that they’ve never killed anything or gotten into a real fight for their lives. A lotta times it reminds Dean that he isn’t really a part of Sonny’s world, but usually it just reminds him that Sonny’s world is safe.

Sonny starts calling him Dean Dangerous or D-Dawg, which makes Dean start stupidly stumbling over his words. He doesn’t tell Sonny to stop. He almost does but—Dean thinks if he asked, Sonny would actually stop.

Dean’s getting closer to Jackson, too. He thinks. Jackson runs with him in practice every day now. They argue over movies and crap like that. Dean’s even made a few notes on some stuff ahead of time just so

he'll be solid on what to say when they're running around at practice. He doesn't usually need them though. Feels like he never runs out of things to say around Jackson, even if he's just repeating himself.

Sonny asked him about the notes, though, and Dean had to make some stuff up about remembering his favorite movies and now he's gotta talk movies with Sonny every now and then. Sonny will ask about it, too, which makes Dean feel like maybe he does like hearing Dean's stupid thoughts, 'cause otherwise he wouldn't ask, right?

Sonny even starts taking the other boys down to the theater on Mondays, which was totally Dean's idea but everyone freaking loves it. Sonny likes to let the younger boys pick the movie, but it's not a half bad deal. Dean's caught up on the new releases, for once.

Sonny lets Dean pick, once.

Dean picks *Scream 2*, even though some of the other kids haven't seen *Scream*. Screw them; it's Dean's movie choice. *Scream* 's a freaking classic. They're lucky they've got Dean around to make sure they're seeing good shit.

He watches the entire film with his eyes glued open and fingers denting the armrest. He can't *wait* to tell Jackson all about it tomorrow.

He doesn't get a chance in the afternoon, because Jackson is running late to math, tightly curled hair dripping. Dean doesn't see him again until he's lacing up and stretching for wrestling after school.

"Hey, asshole," Dean says, "saw *Scream 2* yesterday. You're wrong, by the way. No way it's gonna flop."

"It's gonna flop," Jackson rolls his eyes. "What the hell can *Scream 2*, or 3, or 4, or however many sequels you've deluded yourself into thinking they'll make, say that *Scream* didn't say?"

Dean just shakes his head. He can't wait to see Jackson's face when they announce *Scream 3*. No way that isn't going to happen. "You're gonna eat your words when they franchise it."

Jackson shoved Dean lightly. "Franchising isn't the point. It could flop and they still franchise it."

"You didn't even *see* the first *Scream*," Dean tells him.

“You wouldn’t watch *Ghost in the Shell* with me when it came out.”

“Dude,” Dean says, who didn’t have any kind of money for movie tickets, “it’s a cartoon.”

“It’s called anime, asshole.” Jackson says. “It’s a fucking artform.”

“You’re a fucking artform,” Dean mumbles. It’s not his best.

Coach Chin’s whistle cuts off whatever Jackson is going to say. He smirks over at Dean, though, so Dean knows it would’ve been a good one.

The only time Dean’s ever been in Florida, Dad had put them up in the rattiest motel Dean’d ever seen and bounced for over a month. Dean didn’t remember Dad’s absence or the motel so much as the assbackwards fact that it was parked right next door to the swankiest place Dean’d ever seen in his life. He’d look out his damn mold covered window to fucking parapets and lily-white twisting upward spiral thingies. Nuts. Made Dean feel like he had hives just looking at it, but Sam hated it when he closed the curtains so. Curtains stayed open.

Sam would do his homework right under those big windows, looking up out of them whenever he wanted to take a break. It left a sour taste in Dean’s mouth, so he told Sam they might living right across the street from Rich People Land but that didn’t make them residents. Sam had nodded solemnly, which made Dean relax a bit. Sammy wasn’t going to run away to some fantasy land across the street. He was a good kid.

Anyway, Rich People Land aside, Florida wasn’t that great or that bad. Until the food started running low. That’d happened before. Dean just made sure Sammy got his food and skipped whenever he could get away with it and eventually, Dad would show.

But it was taking Dad a while to get back this time. He was doing the hard work of saving people, Dean knew, so he couldn’t complain. But they ran out of bread and peanut butter yesterday and kids would laugh if Dean sent Sam to school with cereal.

So Dean started worrying.

He worried right up until Ashlee asked him out. Then he got an idea.

Ashlee's dad owned some big ass restaurant in Rich People Land, but Dean didn't like her all that much. She was kinda mean and talked to Dean like he was stupid. Which, you know, wasn't wrong or anything, but she didn't have to be so freaking rude about it. Dean'd almost said yes, though, 'cause of the restaurant thing. But then he thought about it. Girl like her wouldn't want to pay. Probably wouldn't even take him to her dad's place.

So he'd said hell no. Ashlee had said she'd get her older brother to punch his lights out. Dean'd said he'd have liked to see her try. And the conversation only went downhill from there.

Ashlee didn't matter, though, because if Dean played his cards right he could try and snatch some of the goods from Ashlee's dad's restaurant without the rotten date. Ashlee was always saying how it was empty as hell between the lunch and dinner rushes. And Dean knew it was best to stick to the daylight hours because the last time Dean'd seen Bobby, he'd gotten a pinched look on his face, like dad when he was thinking about mom, and he'd knelt down next to Dean and told him that if someone was real hungry and needed to get some food, dumpsters in richer places or lighter hours would be his best bet. He'd squeezed Dean's shoulder after that, gently, which felt nice.

Dumpster diving in the sunshine didn't make much sense to Dean, but Bobby was usually right about stuff, which was why Dad kept bringing them back even though Bobby yelled at him a bunch.

Dean didn't tell Sam what he was going to do. He ditched fifth period to make sure he was at the restaurant in time.

When he got to the edge of Rich People Land, he stopped briefly before the crosswalk. Sammy was waiting for him back at the motel, though, so Dean's got to cross the street. He was only a little surprised when no one stopped him or nothing.

Bobby was right. The dumpster was just sitting there and no one was looking twice at it. Dean got the food out easy, and he booked it all the way back home in the hotter than hell Florida humidity. He was sweating buckets by the time he got back across the street, but the food was even still a little warm and the smell kept making his empty stomach growl.

He made himself call Sammy over and get it all out on a plate, hands shaking a bit, before shoveling it in. Dean's stomach closed on and around the food and then started to warm. It felt good at first, filling, but then his stomach got hotter and tighter and Dean stopped eating but it didn't stop, just kept burning, until Dean was bent over the motel toilet spewing whatever the hell he'd just managed to get down all the way back up.

It tasted a lot worse on the way up than going down. Dean's stomach stayed hot, throughout the day. Later, Sam told him he thinks it's cause the food is too rich for him which— yeah.

They don't go back to Florida and Dean's careful not to make that mistake again, but sometimes, talking to Jackson, he can't help but feel the way he did in that sticky Florida motel room, bile burning the back of his throat and stomach aching just 'cause he reached above his pay grade. He's afraid Jackson might end up being one of those things that is just—too rich for his blood.

Jackson starts joining Dean after practice, while Dean is waiting for his bus. The first time he does it, he just comes right over to Dean and swings down next to him. His thighs press against Dean's. He packs tighter than he has to on the bus, but Dean doesn't want to say anything. *It's good to make space* , he tells himself, *public utility and all* . But his stomach felt hot and tight, churning when Jackson's legs would shift around the bench.

"You take the bus?" Dean asks.

Jackson shakes his head, hair bouncing back and forth. "Nah," he says, "I live about ten minutes from the school."

"Then what're you doing here, dumbass?"

"Thought I'd keep your lonely ass company, Winchester."

Dean smirks. "You're just trying to make sure I don't quit the team."

"You're not that good."

"I'm the best you've ever had," Dean tells him, stomach unpleasantly warm. "You're lucky I agreed to join the team."

Jackson lets his smile drop for a second. "I am," he tells Dean seriously. "I think you've got real potential." His serious expression cracks. "Even if you can't seem to win a damn match."

"Shut up," Dean mutters, elbowing him. "Those've been scrimmages."

"Right," Jackson says. "I'm sure it'll be different in an actual match."

Dean gives Jackson his biggest fake smile. "Exactly."

Jackson makes a show of looking around. "When's this bus of yours come, anyway?"

Dean shrugs. "Every hour," he says, "on the hour."

Jackson blinks at him. "You sit here for an hour after practice." It's not really a question. Dean realizes with an ice cold sinking in his stomach that he must have said something wrong. His jaw gets stiff.

"Yeah, well, no," he corrects, defensively. "I—sometimes I go to the grocery store or—there's—it's not even—that long. Of a wait."

"Man," Jackson tells him. "I feel like that's got to be a bit of a wasted hour, you just sitting here staring at the sky."

Usually, Dean reads, but Dean doesn't say that. "Not usually an hour," he tells Jackson, pulling his legs away from Jackson a little bit. "Sometimes it's early." Or late, Dean doesn't say. Jackson already thinks he's enough of a loser.

Jackson stops him though. "Hey," he says, "I'm saying you could do better things with that time. Like getting to fighting fit for our first tournament next month."

Dean blinks. "What?"

Jackson dangles a keychain in front of him. "I got the keys to the wrestling room," he tells Dean. "On account of being junior co-captain and all. What'd you say about getting in a little after hours practice? Come on," he wheedles, "I'll teach you all my tricks. Long as you don't show them to anyone else. Plus, it'll be nice and heated in there, you know, which beats waiting around out here."

He waits expectantly. Dean looks back. He can't remember what he

was going to say. "Okay," he says and Jackson punches the air. It looks so stupid. Dean can't stop beaming at him.

Jackson reaches down and almost grabs his hands. He adjusts to putting them on his own thighs at the last second. Dean and Jackson both stare at his hands for a second and then—

"We gonna stand out here all day?" Dean asks him and Jackson jolts back to life.

"After me, princess," he tells Dean and takes off for the wrestling room.

"I don't care how pretty you beg," he tells the back of Jackson's head, "I'm not watching that movie."

"Film," Jackson says, elbowing Dean lightly. "Not movie. Film."

"Yeah, yeah," Dean grumbles, "it's an artform." And, stomach growing hotter, he follows Jackson inside.

They just -- practice. The moves they went over at actual practice. After thirty minutes, Jackson walks Dean back to his bus station.

"Same time next week?" he teases.

Dean laughs. "Same time next week."

And that's all there is to it. The next day, Jackson follows Dean out of practice to the bus stop and as soon as everyone's gone, wordlessly gets up to unlock the door and let them both in.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Dean is talking to Jackson after practice, like usual. It had moved away from a strictly traditional wrestling practice to something that was a bit more like Dean and Jackson just screwing around, but that was okay. Dean kind of liked it better like that.

“Not one bit,” Jackson replies.

“What, you like starting bottom in referee’s position? That’s your freaking go-to?”

“Can’t take someone down who’s already down,” Jackson says. “And a reversal is just as much as a takedown. Referee’s position, you only got two outcomes: one, person on top gets you in a pin, end match. Two, person on bottom gets a reversal, or an escape, everyone resets to neutral.

“So let’s say the round doesn’t end in a pin. The only way the person on top is taking home any points from the round is if the bottom takes some home first. Way I see it, starting top wrestler’s just points to lose.”

Dean thinks about it. “Sure,” he agrees, “but then there ain’t some guy on top of you driving you into the mat.”

Something in Jackson’s smile sharpens. “Folkstyle wrestling is big on the grappling,” he tells Dean. “Some guy on top of you driving you into the mat is unavoidable. Fact, you’ll be a much better wrestler if you can stop trying to avoid that.”

“How do you figure?”

“Cause most of the dudes you’re out here fighting are on that mat thinking the worst thing that can happen to them is another dude on top of them driving them into the mat. They’re on guard for it. Drilling against it. Muscle memory. The really good ones you gotta trick into a pin.”

This makes sense. “Right.”

“I’m gonna show you something,” Jackson says and Dean’s heart speeds up. Stupid, getting excited over some new wrestling move. “Come here,” Jackson gestures and Dean goes to his knees in the center of the mat. But Jackson surprises him. “No,” he says. “You’re on top.”

“Thought you were trying to show me the benefit of choosing bottom?”

Jackson shrugs, light and easy. “Yeah, but you wanna choose top, you’re gonna choose top. I’m just gonna show you why you’re wrong.”

Dean shrugs. Jackson's a good wrestler. Dean gets on top.

"Okay," Jackson says, "go," and Dean pulls Jackson's elbow into his chest and then almost fumbles his ankle when he's able to grab it, because Jackson's usually sitting out too fast to get a hand on his ankle. Dean thinks he has him, 'cause he's got a grip on his ankle, but Jackson's going down and then he's rolling out, harmlessly, under Dean's outstretched arms.

"Fuck," Dean tells him. "Thought you were going to sit out."

"I don't always sit out,"

"You always sit out, man," Jackson and Dean say at the same time. It wasn't exactly true: Jackson only went for the sit out escape nine times out of ten.

Jackson breaks first. He huffs out a laugh. "Yeah, well, you got my ankle. Thought a roll out would've been safer."

Dean clicks his tongue. "You saying I got you?"

"Sorry, who got the points again?" Jackson replies. Jackson cups a hand around his ear, like he's waiting for Dean's answer.

Dean looks around; but they're alone. Of course they're alone. He licks his lips. "So, you're saying bottom gets you more points?"

"I'm saying if you can't finish, you're gonna want to call bottom."

"What if I can finish?" Dean asks.

Jackson's smirk is slow and has Dean's fingers twitching against his shorts, hyperaware of the sweat creeping down his side. "You couldn't finish in the first round. How'm I supposed to believe you can finish now?"

"I'll have to prove it."

Wordless, maintaining eye contact with Dean, Jackson sinks to his knees and leans forward, onto his palms. There's a fizzling in Dean's stomach. He swallows compulsively and walks around behind Jackson. His head feels slow and hazy. He doesn't even try to grab Jackson's foot this time, but it doesn't matter because Jackson sits out, pushes Dean's head down and he's free. He's going for an underhook when Dean's brain clicks back on.

From then on, it's brutal. Dean doesn't have time to think. Jackson's out (' *two points for an escape*' something inside his skull mutters), which sets them as close to neutral as you can get while staying on the ground. Jackson will come in, go for the throw, Dean'll knock him back. Trading jabs, glances, waiting for the silences. Dean feels his focus narrowing, waiting, *hunting* . Then he sees it: Jackson surges forward and Dean hits the ground, shooting for his legs.

He drives Jackson back all the way out of the wrestling circle on the floor and into the wall. It's out of bounds, but they play through it. Bounds, whistles, constraints to fighting had all been new to Dean and he forgets about them easily. Jackson doesn't let Dean off, though. Grapples back against Dean and hooks around his head. Dean goes for the under hook but it's weak and Jackson knows it. Dean pulls; Jackson pulls harder. And then he's spilling out, Jackson driving him down, hard, into the mat.

Dean twists, and kicks out but Jackson keeps him there. He's not on his back yet but Jackson's got his head tight and Dean is straining away as hard as he can and staying right where he is. Jackson's switching it up, moving angles Dean didn't even know about, coming down hard, and Dean can take it, he can, but when his head gets up enough to see Jackson, huge against the light in the room before he's coming back down on Dean, Dean thinks that maybe it would be okay if he couldn't. Against something so strong, so good. Maybe it would be okay if he didn't have to take it. If he couldn't. If someone else was that strong. Maybe it would be okay if he wasn't.

Blood floods his mouth, salty and hot. Dean's bit the inside of his cheeks. He's in a tight ball, he realizes, Jackson above him. Oh. He posts a knee and then it's easier. He drops the weak hold, and wrenches Jackson free of his head.

Like a rubber band, he snaps back. But Dean knows this trick now. He breaks the grip.

Reset to neutral, again, but Dean doesn't have a chance to think about it. Jackson shoots, Dean sprawls, muscle memory taking over completely. Jackson's ready for the sprawl, though, and is driving Dean back, back, back, until Dean's the one hitting the wall in some sort of grotesque parody of earlier, only Jackson's still in charge. Jackson pulls at his leg and Dean --

Dean drops like a stone.

Scrambles, stops Jackson's pull, and holds the position on his stomach. He's got this, he thinks, and then Jackson's bear hugging his arms together while Dean lies there on his stomach and oh he does *not* got this.

"Coupla ways we can play this move," Jackson pants in his ear while Dean tries viciously to kick out, "but this is the most fun."

He sits down on Dean and puts his—his fucking arms over Dean's thighs and Dean can't fucking budge half an inch, stuck between Jackson's thighs like that and then Jackson rolls them both over and that's it. Jackson's on his stomach, thighs holding Dean to the mat in a pin tighter than his arms could've.

After a minute, Dean kicks. "Hey, asshole," he says and Jackson relaxes his grip and flips over to face Dean. Dean lets his legs drop, only that means he's practically sitting in Jackson's lap, thigh over thigh.

Dean tries to push himself up, but Jackson kicks out his hand and Dean gives up. Lets himself flop back. Toes curling in. Jackson's breaths evening out beneath him. Eventually, he feels Jackson move, pulling his legs in.

A few seconds later, Jackson's head pops up. He puts his hands on either side of Dean's head. "Good match," he says.

"We broke about every single rule," Dean scoffs.

"Yeah," Jackson grins down at him. Dean thought his heart rate had been starting to calm down, but apparently not.

"You're good, though." Jackson changes tactics abruptly. Dean tries to squirm, but his legs are still tangled in Jackson's and he's got Jackson's arms pinning him in place.

"Whatever," he tells Jackson.

"No," Jackson says. "I mean it. You fight harder than anyone else I've ever wrestled."

Dean takes a breath. Jackson doesn't move. Dean doesn't either. He looks up at Jackson's flat nose and dark brown eyes and tries not to react when the sweat drips off Jackson's brow and back onto Dean. He can barely breathe. Jackson moves his face forward, thighs pressing tight against Dean, burning.

“So?” Jackson asks.

“What?” Dean’s voice cracks. “I mean. What?” he repeats, voice deeper.

“You want bottom,” he tells Dean. “Right?”

Dean clears his throat. “Isn’t that more your position?”

“I’m flexible,” Jackson shrugs. “Besides, newbie like yourself needs all the help he can get.”

“Ha,” Dean replies, teasing. He’s not really laughing, though. He’s not sure what’s going on. He’s not sure he wants it to stop. He looks back at Jackson’s face. Jackson’s brows draw back and his forehead creases and then straightens as he seems to come to some sort of conclusion.

“Say it,” Jackson commands.

Dean looks away. “Bottom’s a better strategic position,” he tells Jackson’s left knee.

“No,” Jackson says, nudging him. “I picked last time. You gotta say what position you want.”

This makes Dean look back at Jackson. “We’re going again?”

It’s only because they’re pressed so tightly into each other that Dean can feel Jackson tense against him. “You don’t want to?”

“Didn’t say that.”

“Right. So, then, what position?”

Dean bites his lip.

“Christ,” Jackson tells him, “how is this hard, Winchester?”

Dean wants to say top. “Bottom,” he says. “I’ll take -- I want bottom.”

“Technically,” Jackson tells him, standing up and letting some of the blood rush back to Dean’s body, “it’s called the defensive starting position.”

“Asshole,” Dean says, and uses Jackson’s outstretched hand to flip him over and onto the ground. Jackson, because he’s an asshole, lets Dean.

They go again.

Dean misses his bus.

Dean is starting to think the ONCE YOU'VE WRESTLED, EVERYTHING ELSE IN LIFE IS EASY poster is mocking him. When he catches Dean glaring at it, Coach assigns him additional sprints "if you think this ain't gonna be hard enough".

Jackson claps him on the shoulder, after Dean's done, tells him he's a tough kid and Coach is a sadistic bastard since his own wrestling career stalled out in college. "I guess those extra 'practices' have been paying off," he teases, and Dean's hot all over.

"Thanks, man."

Jackson smiles at him. "Don't forget weigh-ins," he tells Dean. "We've got a tournament this Saturday." Dean doesn't know what that means. He doesn't want to say that, though. He follows Jackson to the backroom. There's only two girls on the team, and they don't linger. So by the time Dean gets back there, it's reeks of sweaty boys, singlets pulled down around this waist. One of the boys is pretending to fan himself with a limp wrist while another teammate shoves him to the side, laughing. It makes his muscles heave, clenching up and down as he laughs.

Dean looks away.

"Dean," Jackson says. "Up here."

He's pointing at a scale. That must be weigh-ins. "I, uh, just step here?" he checks.

"Yeah." Jackson grabs the back of his arm to pull him up onto the scale. He leans in. "It's for weight classes."

"Sorry?"

Jackson laughs. His teeth are white. That's all Dean can think. "What," he says, "you think we're tossing you on the mat against some two hundred pound senior?"

Dean doesn't say that's exactly what he thought.

"Nah, man," Jackson explains. "Weight classes. You're only ever supposed to wrestle people within a few pounds of you."

"Why?"

"Why? What, are you kidding me?" Jackson's grin fades a bit. "You aren't. Damn, Winchester. 'Cause it ain't fair," he says. "Wrestling's one hell of a sport, but it's skill that it comes down to. Not brute force. It's what you do with the strength you have."

That kind of thinking would get Jackson killed on a hunt, Dean thinks. That kind of thinking would get Jackson extra training with dad. Hunting ain't fair, he wants to say. But wrestling is.

So Dean steps on the scale.

Jackson looked at it, then back up at Dean. "You're a bit too light for me," he says. "I wrestle two weight classes above you," he explains. "Guess you're just going to have to pack on some muscle if you wanna wrestle me."

Dean doesn't want to wrestle Jackson. Not competitively. He wants—"worried it would hurt your reputation being taken down by a first timer like me?" he asks.

Jackson laughs again, low and close. "You're something else," he tells Dean. Dean already knew that, he thinks petulantly. "You should hang back. I wanna show you something."

"I have to—" Dean starts, but he doesn't. Sammy isn't here. Sammy's a good kid, so he gets to still be with dad.

"Come on," Jackson needles. "You'll like this."

"We'll see," Dean hedges. He doesn't know what Sonny will say. He thinks Sonny will say yes. Sonny likes to see them doing this kind of stuff. He doesn't know why he's hedging, either, when both he and Jackson know he'll be there.

"You gotta shower first, though, Winchester."

"Long as it's not dinner with your family, Cox, you're on."

Jackson grins and dips to take his own shower. Dean gives it a minute, then joins the other boys. Most of them don't shower at the gym but

it's not unheard of. Dean pats himself down, shakes out his hair, and slams the water off. He's not sure it helped that much, to be honest.

Jackson is dressed and waiting for Dean when he gets out of the locker room.

"So?" Dean asks.

"I'm taking you to the movies," Jackson tells him.

"I don't—"

Jackson cuts him off before he can really get going with any of his premade excuses: that he doesn't have the money, or the time, or the desire. "Consider this a bet. You hate *Ghost in the Shell*? I'll watch your stupid horror movie."

"*Scream* isn't stupid," Dean tells him.

"I'll watch your very intelligent and smart horror movie," Jackson says.

Dean hesitates. It sounds like a girl movie, which Dean doesn't think his dad would be too happy with, and it's animated. But Jackson is cool, and Jackson likes it. And he'd watch *Scream* with Dean. Dean thinks Jackson would be a great person to watch *Scream* with. Cause there are a couple of good jump scares and you don't really suspect what's actually happening. And there's lots of huddling around a bowl of popcorn or whatever.

"Fine," he agrees, and lets Jackson put his hand on his back to steer him downtown.

Round Three: the third round of a folkstyle wrestling match also starts in "referee's position". This time, the other wrestler chooses which position they start in.

“This,” Jackson breathes hot sweaty huffs into Dean’s hip, “is called a cradle.” Dean knows what a cradle is. Coach thinks they’re a bitch move, so they don’t practice them too much. Any pin’s a good pin but there’s nothing like a crossface or half nelson to put ‘em in their place, as Coach likes to say when they do practice them.

“And how do I break it?” Dean asks Jackson.

“Like a regular cradle,” Jackson says, and relaxes his arms. “You’re gonna wanna break my grip. Try it.”

Jackson lets Dean push his fingers apart. “Good,” he says, and this is where Jackson is supposed to spring up on his feet and say, “Let’s go again.” But Jackson doesn’t move. Jackson stays still, head pressing painfully into Dean’s side, hands no longer clutched, draped over Dean’s chest and calf.

Dean feels woozy. He doesn’t move either. His nose twitches. His mouth is dry. “Jackson?”

Jackson draws his head out of Dean’s side. “I wanna try something.” He licks his lips. Dean shivers.

“Yeah,” Dean says and his voice is gruffer than it’s ever been. “Whatever you want, man.”

“We’re gonna go again,” Jackson tells him, eyes on Dean’s. Dean’s nodding before he’s even aware of it. Jackson moves closer. “I’m gonna cradle you again,” he says, “and this time, you’re gonna post your leg so I can’t roll you.”

“What?”

Jackson taps Dean’s ankle and then grabs it. Dean moves it forward just to keep his balance— “oh,” he says, lightbulb going off. “You’re tricking me.”

He can’t see Jackson, but can feel him nodding his approval against Dean’s chest. “Exactly.” He sounds approving. “You’ve got good instincts,” Jackson says. “I want to use those against you.”

“Right,” Dean scoffs. “Alright,” he puts his foot back in place. “I see your game.”

Jackson grabs Dean’s ankle, and Dean posts his foot again. Jackson’s arm shoots forward, under his knee and then his hands lock, tight,

against Dean's pectoral muscles, hugging him towards Jackson. "Now," Jackson tells Dean's hipbone. "Because you've posted your foot, I can't sit through it."

"So you can't cradle me," Dean says.

"I can't do a near cradle," Jackson corrects. "Floor's still open for a suicide cradle."

Well. "You've been holding out on me, Cox."

"Had to make sure you could handle it."

Dean grins. "Okay," he said. "So suicide cradle. How's that work?"

Jackson doesn't give Dean a chance to realize what's happening before he launches right into it. Instead, he fucking—he somersaults over Dean and for a second his shoulders are straight up against the mat and Dean drives down into Jackson's shoulder, then the mat and then suddenly, somehow, Jackson is back up on his feet, head driving through Dean's side, arms locking Dean against the mat.

Dean pushes, the way he's been practicing, but he's gone for it: Jackson's got the leverage and he knows it.

"Two, three," Jackson drops his arms and flops back next to Dean, letting Dean's shoulder arch up off the mat only after he's been beaten. "Thought you'd put up more of a fight."

"How'd you do that?"

"Good, right?"

Dean doesn't say anything but yeah. Yeah, it's good.

"You wanna try?" Jackson asks, breath still heavy and damp.

Dean can still feel Jackson's heartbeat through his shoulder. He isn't sure he ever wants to move again. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

They get back up into referee's position. It's not so weird anymore—it almost feels natural, slipping in behind Jackson, finding his elbow and stomach. Holding, tensing, waiting. Flush against someone else. Not at all like dad's training, which involves standing as far apart as possible, keeping space or, better yet, a weapon between a body. Dad's training is a different kind of dance, all getting hits in without taking them.

“It’s a bit tricky,” Jackson says, “you might have to do some things depending on how good the guy is to get him to post the leg, so you can get him in a cradle. But once you have the cradle, you’re going to roll right over him and you’re going to keep on rolling right through that.” *So that’s what the fucking somersault had been .*

“Now, your shoulders are gonna hit that mat at the end of the roll, right,” Jackson thumps the mat to demonstrate, “and you can’t panic. You gotta hold me tight. You got a loose grip, you panic even a little, then it’s gone, right? Cause you’re putting yourself in a position to get pinned. You gotta hold tight and roll him over.”

“Alright,” he scoffs. “It’s a dangerous move.”

Dean can feel Jackson’s shrug ripple into his stomach. “Not dangerous, I guess. You gotta make yourself vulnerable. It’s a risk. But wrestling ain’t the kind of sport you can play safe, or with a safety net. It’s all or nothing, no holds barred, for two minutes. You’re working every single muscle harder than you’ve ever worked ‘em and the other guy is doing the same. And if you’re playing it safe, hell, you’re just dragging out the match. Dragging out the loss.”

Dean lets his chin fall against Jackson’s back. “You done philosophizing?”

Jackson laughs and Dean shivers with it. Time to play. He crossfaces Jackson and goes for the ankle. It’s a classic break and Jackson posts the foot for him. Dean’s pulling his hands up under Jackson’s legs for the cradle when it starts falling apart. Still, he clenches tight, pulls, and then flings his body over Jackson’s. There’s a split second where he’s moving, staring at the dark red target on the ceiling, but Dean’s sweaty fingers are slipping against each other as he tries to move through it and then he’s not moving up at all anymore. He’s tumbling straight down. Jackson, all one hundred and sixty-five pounds of him driving Dean back into the mat.

Then, the pressure’s gone, and Dean can scramble forward, tucking his head against Jackson’s rib and working up to his feet, lungs burning.

“Good,” Jackson pants, one hand on his knees, the other over Dean’s shoulder, “but,” pant, “you,” “froze.”

“Fuck you, man.” Dean tries to shove off, but Jackson just holds him there.

Jackson’s laughing, but quietly. Dean’s still resting his head against his

ribs, still half standing, awkwardly. Jackson's not doing this right, Dean knows. He's been to enough practices to know how this goes. You gotta practice the move before trying it in a match. You're supposed to let your wrestling partner do the move. You're not supposed to fight back. Dean doesn't say anything because—Dean doesn't say anything.

He breathes in the thick smell of Jackson's sweat instead and tries to blink the sting of it in his eyes, shake the ache out of his arms. He lets them loosen, finally, and Jackson lets him slip out of his hold. They circle each other.

It's still and silent in the empty wrestling room. Outside, the sky gets darker. Dean's not sure how much time has passed, how late it's been. He sees Jackson's chest move up and down.

Eventually, Jackson speaks. "You gotta want it, Dean. You gotta want to win, not for the match to end. That's what gets wrestlers. It's two minutes, but it's hell. Hell, through and through. Wrestling is stamina. Willpower. Staying the course, right up until the end. People start losing when they start letting themselves lose."

"Give me a break," Dean says. "It's my first time."

"I'm just imparting wisdom," Jackson says.

Dean snorts. "Like hell you are."

They fall silent again. Then, Dean pulls his arms back, cold. He wraps his arms around himself. "You gonna impart some more wisdom, or we gonna try that again?"

Jackson turns his head towards Dean. "I'm just trying to help your sorry ass."

But he gets down on the mat, sinking right into bottom position, and Dean figures that means, yeah, they're starting again. Dean slides in behind him and holds for a beat, then starts. Jackson doesn't let him have it easy this time; he goes for Dean's hand and tries to turn out, break Dean's grip.

So Dean switches it up. Catches him off guard from the opposite side, Jackson turning out right into his crossface. And it's hard and awkward, but Dean bites down and forces his hands together. He goes for the suicide cradle, but it's a harder fall from a higher half crouch. Dean's not letting Jackson win, though. He forces through the roll and

drives his head into empty air. He's sweeping his legs up but Jackson is already slipping loose, on his way to standing.

"That's an escape," he says.

"I almost had you."

"You weren't even close," Jackson tells him, and that's true. Dean wasn't even close to having him.

"Again?" Dean asks.

"It's gonna go the same, man," Jackson says. "I dunno if you've heard, but I'm pretty good."

He is. The only match Jackson ever lost in three years of wrestling was a tournament just before the state champions his sophomore year.

Dean shrugs. "I'm okay with that if you are."

"You're asking if I'm okay with winning?"

Instead of responding, Dean gets back down on the mat, gesturing Jackson down in front of him, in a weird pantomime of a hug. They go again. And again after that.

They're there all evening, until the sky is black and Jackson looks up, says his mom's going to be spitting fury if he doesn't get going.

"That was a good fight, Dean Winchester." Jackson claps him on the shoulder and Dean returns it.

"Back at you, Jackson Cox."

"You're gonna get that suicide cradle one day," he tells Dean. "I know it."

Dean's not so sure. "Just wait 'til tomorrow," he promises. He doesn't say he's still two weight classes behind Jackson. He doesn't say he could take anyone in a fair bout. He's pretty sure he couldn't take Jackson anyway, even if they did wrestle the same weight class.

Jackson doesn't respond to that. Just stands there, for a second, staring at him. He steps in close. Dean swallows. Dean stands perfectly still, relaxed. Looks back.

Jackson dips his head in and for a second Dean thinks—Dean leans—but. “Wrestling isn’t what you think. You’re trying to force it. You’re trying to brute force your way through that and yeah, you’re strong and you got some moves, but in wrestling, anyone worth wrestling already knows your moves. There ain’t that many moves.” Jackson puts his hand on Dean’s shoulder. Leaves it there.

“I’m still learning a few,” Dean tells him. He’s not sure what he means. Jackson keeps talking.

“You and these guys out there, you all know the same moves and you’re all strong and you’ve all got brute force to spare. So take the element of surprise. They’ve got muscle memory. Years and years of it. So use that against them, you know?”

“And don’t be afraid to let my shoulders touch the mat?” Dean asks.

“Don’t be afraid to let your shoulders touch the mat,” he says. “People get sloppy when they think they’ve won and mentally, that’ll be where some of these guys are.”

“And if they aren’t?”

Jackson’s grin is razor sharp. “Then you deserve the loss ‘cause sometimes, they’re just better. They deserve it.”

Dean thinks he understands. Huntings a bit like that too. You go in knowing the risks and if you come out in a body bag, that’s on you. You gotta be willing to die first. He can get behind it.

“Anyway,” Jackson says. “I’m heading home.” He hasn’t taken his hand off Dean’s shoulder yet. “You’re welcome to come, if you want.”

Dean’s stomach does a somersault of its own, landing face up, staring at the ceiling. Dean blinks. “Nah,” he says with a practiced nonchalance. “Sonny’ll get fussy if I’m not back soon. Plus,” he makes a show of stuffing his nose deep into his armpit, inhaling. “I fucking reek.”

Jackson jokes back with him, waving his hands at Dean. “That’s certainly true,” but he stays paused for an extra second on the threshold, like he’s expecting Dean to change his mind. Dean doesn’t and Jackson doesn’t seem surprised, which makes sense. Man spent the entire day wrestling with him. Dean figures he’s probably got his number by now.

It's nearly eight when Dean gets back to Sonny's. It means dinner's ended but Dean doesn't mind much. Sonny keeps a leftover's cabinet fully stocked and Dean'd been stuffing odds and ends and whatever else he could find up in his room. It'd been for Sammy, if Dean ever got to see him again, but Dean figured if he had to eat one or two granola bars, it's not like Sammy'd even know.

"You're late."

Dean started, then relaxed into an easy smile. "Extra practice," he said. "Wrestling."

"Coach made you stay?"

Dean could lie pretty easily. It's not like Sonny would check. "Nah," he says instead. "Uh, a friend. I think. Wanted to give me some pointers."

Sonny raises an eyebrow. "This the kid that got you to join the team?"

"Yeah," Dean admits. "He's cool. He's really good at wrestling." Dean stops there at first, but that's not fair to Jackson. "He's funny, too, and patient, even though sometimes he pretends he's not." Dean smiles to himself, remembering Jackson helping him through graphing functions. "He lets me use his colored pens in math," he explains, hoping Sonny understands what he's saying and kinda sorta unable to stop now that he's gotten started saying it. "That was before I even joined wrestling. He's only lost one match. Ever, Sonny. And he really likes watching movies, too, which means it sucks I haven't seen so many, but he might try and get me a DVD if I can return it quick." It's too much, Dean realizes, he's saying too much. He brings it to a half, forces himself to glance up at Sonny.

But Sonny doesn't make anything of it. He just says, "I'm glad you've found such a good friend, Dean," and leaves it at that.

Dean looks down. He thinks Sonny's right, but, "It'll be a bummer when I gotta leave. We move around a bunch." He thinks Sonny can probably read between the lines.

“That’s hard,” Sonny tells him. It’s neutral. *Starting position*, Dean thinks.

“It, uh, sucks.” Dean replies. Screw Jackson. Dean’s going top, ‘cause Dean’s going to attack. “There’s no freaking point to all this anyway.”

“I don’t disagree with you there,” Sonny tells him. “But you know this can always be a home for you, right Dean? Long as you want it. If you ever want a place to just stay. You’re always welcome.”

Dean did know that. But it’s different hearing Sonny say it. He takes a bite of his burger to cover. “Thanks,” he tells Sonny.

“No need,” Sonny tells him, “you’re a great kid.”

Dean swallows. “Not really,” he says, “else I wouldn’t have gotten caught stealing.” Else dad wouldn’t have left him here to begin with.

“Being hungry’s not a crime.” It’s something Sonny’s said before, but Dean doesn’t like to think about it.

“I told you—”

“I know,” Sonny tells him. “I’m just saying it generally, then.”

Dean takes another bite of his burger. “I can really stay here?”

Sonny nods.

“Cause these burgers are fucking—great,” Dean says. “And the blueberry pancakes? Perfection.”

“I’ll have to take you back here,” Sonny says, “when you win your first tournament. We can celebrate.”

Dean’s stomach heats up with his cheeks and he thinks, for a second, that he might vomit. But it’s the kind of heat that’s not bad at all so he just sits with it, solid and warm inside him.

“Thanks,” he tells Sonny. Then, cautiously, “and my friend?”

“We’ll take your friend,” Sonny replies, “and whoever else you might want to bring. Guy or girl.”

Dean doesn’t know what to say to that. He works his jaw a bit. “Oh,” he settles on.

Sonny leans over the table and messes up his hair. "You're a good one, D-Dawg."

Dean gives the table the smallest smile he can.

He hits the mat and he pulls back hard, shoulder blades glazing the ground. He feels Jackson, forcing him against the mat, but it's weird. Dean tries to pull and keep pulling, driving through the force but Jackson's immovable. Dean kicks up and Jackson catches his feet. Where the hell had his hands come from? But Dean doesn't have time to think about it because Jackson is pulling Dean towards him, one hand cradling Dean's head while the other thumbs his hipbone dragging him closer and closer and closer and --

Dean wakes up with a start. It's just a dream. It's just a dream about wrestling which -- makes sense. Dean's been doing a lot wrestling lately. He kicks off the covers and lies there, burning, trying to cool down.

It's just a dream, he reminds himself, and tries to make himself forget it in the morning.

Dean kicks up and back, arching his back into a bridge, but Jackson just dances; keeping his feet light, he turns in a circle, forcing, forcing, forcing—

"Three," and Jackson lets go, panting. "That's a pin."

"Fuck you, man," Dean tells him. It still feels a bit like his dream. The air has the same heady quality. Dean hasn't been able to forget the feeling of Jackson's palm on the back of his head.

"You're working against me," Jackson says. "You have to work with me."

Dean struggles a bit, mostly for show. "You should do that one with

your thighs again,” Dean tells him.

Jackson slams his head into Dean’s side in response. He rolls Dean forward a bit and Dean lets him.

“Pretty sure this isn’t regulation.”

“Pretty sure I’m rolling you off your back,” Jackson replies. “Now,” he says, “don’t fight me. I’m gonna show you something cool.”

Dean lets Jackson pull him and then he keeps going all the way over until he’s—on top of Jackson. His arms are wrapped together under Jackson’s chest, hands grabbing Jackson’s arms automatically as he fell.

“See how that works?” Jackson asks him.

Dean feels Jackson’s arms, thick and tense, beneath him. “Yeah,” he tells Jackson, mouth completely dry. “What’d you even do to get arms like this?”

“Wrestling for three years,” Jackson tells him.

“Oh,” Dean says. “Well, it’s working for you.”

Jackson laughs loudly and Dean does too. “You’re terrible at this.”

Dean’s horribly sure that he has no idea what Jackson’s talking about and that he knows exactly what Jackson’s talking about. “It’s my first time,” he tells Jackson. Then he adds, just in case, “doing wrestling.”

“Don’t worry,” Jackson starts to say. “I’m—”

“What the hell are you two boys doing?” Coach Smith’s voice breaks across Dean’s focus and Dean’s rolling off Jackson before he can even think about it. Muscle memory, he supposes. “Cox, you’re up for senior co-captain, and this is what you want to be doing? Prancing around after hours like some kind of—with Winchester?”

Jackson stays, insolently, on the floor. “We were just getting some extra practice in.”

“Right,” Coach Smith snorts. “Practicing.”

“We were, Coach,” Jackson says earnestly. Dean’s still trying to make his lungs work, let alone his vocal chords. “I was showing Dean how to do suicide craddles—”

“You know we don’t do that move here.”

“Yeah,” Jackson says, “but it’s a good one.”

“It ain’t,” Coach Smith says. “And if this is what you’re going to do with your key, don’t bother coming back to the team after you’ve locked up.”

Dean is nodding and Jackson still isn’t moving, still just lying there where Dean left him, on the center of the mat.

“Fine.” Jackson’s glaring at Coach Smith. “We’ll stop practicing here.”

“Ladies,” he says, “you shouldn’t be practicing that,” he gestures between them, “anywhere.”

“Are you --” Jackson looks outraged still.

“Jackson,” Dean mutters, “drop it.”

Jackson looks at him and Dean freezes. Jackson looks away first. “Alright,” he tells Coach Smith with a nod in Dean’s direction. “We’re going.”

Dean still can’t move, so Jackson comes over and grabs Dean’s arm. When he feels Jackson’s fingers on his bicep, Dean comes to life. He wrenches his arm out of Jackson’s grip and walks, white faced, towards the door.

Dean’s legs don’t feel too great, and neither does his head, but they’ll carry him out the door at least. He keeps going, though, ignoring Jackson calling after him. Speeds up. Bus stop isn’t far.

Jackson follows him to the bus stop.

“Dean,” he says, “stop.”

Dean stops and Jackson walks into his back. “Oh,” he says, “I didn’t think that would work.”

Dean turns around. Jackson isn’t touching him, but he’s got both of his hands raised up. Dean can’t tell if it’s to keep Dean away or hold him in place. “Dean,” he says, “it’s okay. I know you’re not like that.” His eyes flick across Dean’s face. “You aren’t like that, right?”

Dean swallows.

“Right?” Jackson prompts. He’s still looking at Dean like he’s searching for something. Dean blinks. “Dean? You’re not like that?”

Dean shakes his head. “No,” he says. “I’m not like that.”

“Right.” Jackson nods once, sharply. He lets his hands drop to his side, looks out at the street. “Good.”

It’s like there’s something clogging up Dean’s throat. He clears it. “What about you?”

Jackson’s eyes land back on Dean’s nose. “What?”

“You’re not, uh, like that either. Are you?”

Jackson pauses, longer than Dean had. His eyes shift lower. “No,” he says, eventually. There’s something in his voice Dean doesn’t recognize. “I’m not.”

“Oh,” Dean says. He doesn’t say anything else. It wasn’t like he was expecting Jackson to say something different.

“So that’s good,” Jackson tells him, and then he clasps Dean’s shoulder, hard, and gives it a shake.

“That’s good,” Dean echoes woodenly. Jackson’s hand is still on his shoulder.

“It’s not a problem for me,” Jackson tells Dean. “People who are ...”

Dean doesn’t want to talk about this anymore. “It’s a problem for me,” he tells Jackson.

Jackson withdraws his hand. “I’d better leave you,” he tells Dean. “The bus’ll be here soon.”

The bus will be here in twenty three minutes. If Dean’s lucky. “Yeah,” Dean says. “You don’t want your mom to worry.”

When Jackson laughs, it’s jerky and awkward, like the automaton toy Dean had stolen for Sam one Easter. “Guess I should know better than to keep asking you to stop by.”

Dean forces his own smile in return. “Guess so,” he tells Jackson.

“Seeya, Dean.”

Dean waves. "Back at you," he tells Jackson and then he watches Jackson walk, without turning around, all the way back to the school.

Jackson's late to math class the next day. He takes the spot next to Dean, like usual. It's the only one left open, actually, because Jackson always sits next to Dean. He smiles at Dean, opens his pencil case, and pushes it towards Dean. Dean smiles back at Jackson and ignores the pencil case.

It's actually easier to write in pencil. Dean can erase that way, if he makes a mistake.

Dean can't tell if Jackson notices. Jackson isn't looking over at Dean, which is pretty unusual, but maybe he's just feeling bad about yesterday.

When they go to leave, Jackson packs up and then waits, expectantly for Dean before zipping up his pencil case. Dean waggles his own pencil awkward and Jackson starts forward awkwardly and grabs it.

"See you at practice," Dean tells him hopefully. Jackson doesn't respond, but maybe he didn't hear Dean.

Dean doesn't really get a chance to talk to Jackson at practice, which is typical. Jackson's still a lot faster than Dean during conditioning, even though Dean's catching up. Sometimes Jackson looks back at him and makes a face. Whatever. There isn't time to worry about it. Coach is running them hard. The season is starting this weekend, so. No more scrimmages.

They go right into live wrestling after conditioning. Dean's with Mike and Kamal. Kamal's a weight class under and Mike's a weight class over, but Kamal's harder for Dean to keep down.

"Don't worry about him," Mike says, "you're not going to be wrestling lightweights anyway." He says this to Dean like he's trying to give him

good advice, but his lip is curled up in a way Dean doesn't like. Mike was supposed to wrestle Dean's weight class, but Dean beat him out.

"Might have a few," Dean says. "Especially if I keep 135's after the winter break."

"Yeah, if," Mike says.

Dean grins at him. He leans in, kind of like how Mike had done with him. "Yeah," he says. "If. But between you and me, I don't think it's much of an if."

Mike scowls, dropping the façade, but before he can do anything, Coach comes over to them both. "Winchester. Are you going to stop distracting McCormic or am I going to have to discipline you?"

Dean goes hot, then cold, then white. "Yes, sir," he says. "I mean, no sir. I mean," he stammers.

"I had to pee," Kamal says. "They were waiting for me."

Coach Smith doesn't acknowledge Kamal. "Laps should've started two minutes ago," he tells them and the boys rush to comply.

Jackson runs next to Dean, like usual, but he doesn't say anything. And when practice ends, Jackson gives him a small, apologetic smile and tells him that he really shouldn't've been staying so late all those other times. His mom doesn't like it.

"Right," Dean replies. "I get it."

Jackson keeps talking though. "She gets crazy nervous, you know, with her kids. I keep telling her that I'm just trying to help you out but. Course, it doesn't help you didn't ever want to meet her. Don't. I mean, don't want to meet her. She's just -- you know how mom's are. Little nutty."

Dean nods. "I hear you, man," he says. "God save us from the overbearing mother's of the world." He grins. He hopes it looks good.

Jackson gives a weak chuckle. "You aren't mad?"

"Dude," Dean tells him.

Jackson shakes his head at himself. "Goodbye, Dean Winchester."

There's a lump in Dean's throat for no frigging reason, so Dean just

sticks up his hand to do a stupid little wave.

The bus is early, which is -- Good, because Dean'd stopped bringing books to read.

He goes right to his bed when he gets back to Sonny's and shoves the first paperback he can find into his backpack and then he goes out into the yard for chores. He'd been planning on eating one of the granola bars in his stash that night. Sammy's least favorite flavor, but Dean liked it.

But his stomach felt tight and Dean would have to be an idiot to waste food on himself if he didn't even get in the extra practicing hours to earn it.

He's pretty quiet at dinner, which he thinks Sonny notices. He doesn't say anything, though. He just takes Dean to breakfast before school the next morning and tells him good luck in the tournament.

Dean wins all his matches. It turns out Jackson was right: Dean's pretty good at this wrestling thing.

Eventually, inevitably, finally, dad shows up. Dean's getting ready to take Robin to prom and the national qualifiers for wrestling are just around the corner but. There are some things that are constant in the universe and people like Dean always leaving is one of them.

Sonny says he'll fight for Dean to stay, if he wants him to and Dean—sees Sam outside the window, in the back of the car. He doesn't need to see his dad to picture him.

“Nah,” Dean is telling Sonny, Jackson's words floating up into his mind. *Hold on tight as you can, and don't blink when your shoulders hit the mat* . He thinks he gets it now.

He rubs his wrist nervously, bruises long since faded, and tries to get back up on his feet before the buzzer sounds. Dad doesn't like waiting. For a second, Dean feels like he's already pinned. But it passes and he walks outside to join his family.

End Notes

First, apologies to any wrestling moves I bastardized along the way -- especially in Dean and Jackson's after hours practices, which definitely weren't to code, but sure were fun ;). hopefully, all the rules were easy enough to follow but if you have questions or want to talk wrestling or spn, feel free to drop me a line on tumblr at monalissasandmadhatters. Thank you so much for reading this -- this was a bit of a self indulgent one for me -- and, of course, I love reading your comments so please let me know what you thought!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!